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UNCLAS ALMATY 004282

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EUR/CACEN (JMUDGE); EUR/ACE (JMCKANE); EUR/PPD (JBASEDOW); DRL/PHD

STATE PASS TO USAID

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN KAZAKHSTAN, DECEMBER 4, 2005

REF: Almaty 4281

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Nazarbayev is poised to win a substantial victory with support likely exceeding 70 percent of the vote. While the pre-electoral playing field was not level, opposition candidates engaged in a serious campaign effort that was hindered more by their inability to connect with voters than governmental obstacles. Nazarbayev chose the Kazakhstani equivalent of a Rose Garden strategy, engaging in virtually no personal campaigning after the official start of the campaign period. Opposition candidates Tuyakbay and Baymenov traveled throughout the country, but their strategy of focusing on corruption and competence failed to develop much appeal beyond their core supporters, perhaps 20 percent of the electorate. The majority of voters appear to care most about their improving economic status and stability in the country.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY COT'D: Compared to previous elections, the Central Election Commission has substantially improved its performance and transparency, and has been technically focused and largely impartial. In contrast to last year's Parliamentary (Mazhilis) elections, the CEC has also had a more cooperative and less defensive relationship with the OSCE/ODIHR observer mission headed by Ambassador Glover. Despite significant obstacles, the opposition candidates have gotten their message out through their own newspapers, campaign literature, 15-minute uncensored time blocs on national television, a 60-minute televised open debate, and - in the last few days of the campaign - a few prominent billboards. Government media have provided coverage of all candidates, but little of the substance of the opposition campaign has gotten any airtime. Misuse of administrative resources has been a serious issue.

13. (SBU) SUMMARY COT'D: Despite the numerous shortcomings in the pre-electoral environment, the fundamental fact that opposition candidates were registered and are actively participating in the campaign represents a significant improvement over previous presidential election campaigns. The big question remains how voting and, most importantly, counting and aggregation of the vote will proceed on Election Day. There is also talk of post-election violence: while we discount the likelihood, we have strongly urged the authorities to lower their rhetoric and to exercise restraint (reftel). Our governmental interlocutors are increasingly confident that their message to local authorities to keep their hands off the ballot box will be heeded, but we believe that there is still a major risk that local intervention will mar the voting process. We have made clear to the government that our post-election evaluation will hinge on the honesty and accuracy of the vote count. END SUMMARY

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Results Not in Doubt.  
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14. (SBU) The major unknown in this presidential election campaign is not the outcome. Few observers expect that any opposition candidate would be able to defeat President Nazarbayev, or even force a second round of voting, in the fairest of elections. Nazarbayev told EUR Assistant Secretary Fried in October that his campaign strategy was

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to stay in his office - a prediction that turned out more accurate than we had anticipated. After a vigorous round of regional visits in the spring and summer, Nazarbayev has avoided any formal campaign appearances, choosing the Kazakhstani equivalent of a Rose Garden strategy of looking presidential. Nonetheless, his poll ratings have remained consistent at around 70 percent. A USAID-funded poll that was overseen by the Gallup Organization in late September indicated that 86 percent of the respondents intended to vote for him, a figure we found implausibly

high, but nonetheless, one that underscores the genuine support Nazarbayev enjoys.

15. (SBU) The President's absence from the hustings has

contributed to what has been a pretty lackluster campaign. His four opponents, by contrast, have been engaged throughout the campaign period, making campaign appearances throughout the country. The principal opposition candidate, Zharmakhan Tuyakbay, has not succeeded in generating much enthusiasm beyond the strong core support that the "For a Just Kazakhstan" movement enjoyed going into the election. Charges of high-level corruption, and even explicit mention of the James Giffen "Kazakhgate" scandal in the televised debates, have not overcome the voters' apparent inclination to vote their increasingly prosperous pocket books. Peace, stability, and ethnic accord (particularly important for the 30 percent of the population that is ethnic Russian) work strongly in Nazarbayev's favor. Voters show little sign of wanting to change the status quo.

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. But Electoral Conduct Is  
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16. (SBU) The bigger question is whether this election will represent the kind of significant progress in democratization that we would like to see, and which Nazarbayev has assured us he will deliver. The pre-election period has been decidedly mixed, and has not fully met international standards. Nonetheless, on balance we believe that there has been substantial progress, particularly when measured against previous presidential elections in Kazakhstan. For the first time, there are genuine opposition candidates who are running substantial and determined campaigns. The performance of the Central Election Commission has improved dramatically.

17. (SBU) The government has welcomed a large-scale OSCE election observation mission. Opposition candidates received 15 minutes of uncensored air time on the state-controlled television channel that is received throughout the country, and there was a live 60-minute televised debate. Although the debate was marred by the absence of Nazarbayev, it provided a real opportunity for the other candidates to lay out their programs. Opposition candidates produced and distributed campaign literature, and the opposition press increased their press runs substantially. Candidates traveled freely throughout the country and made daily public appearances. The government accepted as its own a U.S.-proposed "code of conduct" and largely followed through on the letter of its provisions.

18. (SBU) There were also significant shortcomings. Two print-runs of opposition newspapers were seized during the early days of the campaign. State-owned media provided news coverage of the opposition campaign, but largely in a negative and not particularly informative fashion. Candidates were assigned smaller, less-central campaign venues than they requested. Tuyakbay and Baymenov reported numerous efforts to disrupt or prevent their campaign events. There have been numerous incidents of low-level police harassment, seizure of campaign materials and opposition newspapers, and unproven accusations of opposition campaign malfeasance. Vague charges by the security authorities of planned violence have marred the atmosphere. Nazarbayev posters have popped up in some governmental institutions, and the OSCE has documented numerous incidents of pressure being applied to potential voters.

19. (SBU) The major outstanding questions focus on Election Day. During last year's parliamentary elections, despite certain procedural difficulties voting went relatively smoothly during the first round at the polling places, and precinct-level counting was by-and-large accurate. There was large-scale manipulation during the aggregation process, when local authorities clearly intervened to ensure pre-determined results. A complete lack of transparency in releasing disaggregated vote totals was an enabling factor. The second round of voting was marred by blatant misuse of administrative resources, including the bussing of voters to numerous polling stations.

110. (SBU) This time, Nazarbayev's senior advisors tell us they have undertaken serious measures to ensure that local authorities, particularly the regional akims (governors) appointed by the President, will not repeat this performance. The advisors seem increasingly confident that they have this problem in hand, in part by threatening the akims with dismissal or even criminal prosecution if they engage in such falsifications and abuses. The CEC has assured us that they will release

precinct-by-precinct results on the Internet within 24 hours, and that photocopiers have been installed in all polling stations to ensure that all observers receive copies of precinct protocols.

11. (SBU) Comment: We are not nearly as confident as our interlocutors that the process will be as smooth as they anticipate. In the final analysis, only a transparently honest vote count will get the government the recognition of "substantial improvement" that it is seeking.

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